

**We are Fundamentally Decent People:
So Why Don't We Help the Guy in the Ditch?**

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Combined St. Johns and St. Andrews Worship Services

Read Luke 10:23-37

An old joke. A Bay Street stockbroker appears before the pearly gates and seeks admission. "Who are you?" says St. Peter.

"I am Joe Smith a famous Bay Street stockbroker.:

"What is it that entitles you to admission?"

"Well, for one thing, the other day I saw a woman on Younge Street and handed her a quarter."

St. Peter shouts behind him. "Is that in the records Gabriel?"

"Yes, St. Peter," Gabriel replies.

"What else have you done?" St Peter asks.

"Well, the other night on my way into Maple Leaf Gardens, I ran into a half frozen drunk man and I gave him a quarter."

" Gabriel, is that in the records?"

"Yes, St. Peter."

" What else have you done?"

"That's all I can think of."

"What do you think we ought to do with this guy, Gabriel."

"Give him back his fifty cents and tell him where he can go."

Now, besides the fact that this joke grotesquely implies how we might understand the mystery of the afterlife and besides the fact that this joke flies in the face of what we understand as grace, (that is the unearned love of God that we all receive), years ago I might have been tempted to use it to underline today's passage. I probably would have explored the nuances of the biblical passage of the "Good Samaritan" as we have come to know it. Then, I would have told the joke as an illustration of how shockingly inadequate our efforts are to do the right thing. The joke also has the added advantage of making us feel a little superior because each of us obviously does better than that stockbroker and we are here today together in church, after all. I might have also been tempted to browbeat you all and myself a little, comparing us to the priest and the Levite. I would be the priest and you all would be the Levites. Some other really, really good person, historical or modern, would be the Samaritan, thus showing how at least one actual human person "went and did likewise." However, after much pondering, reading, praying, studying and learning from others much wiser than me, I don't do that anymore. I have come to believe that we are fundamentally decent people. The question I am more inclined to wrestle with these days is not "Why are we such sinful people?" but rather "If we are fundamentally decent people, why is it so difficult to do good in the world and make the right choices?" I read a

book last year that described an actual psychological experiment that radically altered how I might begin to look at that question. More about that later.

First, let us learn about the scripture passage together. Why does Jesus tell the parable? Because the lawyers have become involved! My partner Carl says all things become more complex when lawyers are involved. Lawyers of the day were expert in the law of the day, Jewish law, the minutiae of which were contained in the Hebrew scriptures. In today's passage, one of the lawyers asked the question that I guess the stockbroker in the joke should have asked in his lifetime, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 25) The lawyer is not really that interested in Jesus' reply. He mostly is interested in impressing the crowd around Jesus expecting the great Teacher to indicate that he is righteous and acceptable to God. He is a skilled lawyer. You can tell because he seems to have asked the right question to get Jesus, who has a habit of answering questions with questions, to ask him the very best on in reply which is, "What is written in the law? What do you see there?" (v. 26) The very skilled lawyer gives the most excellent answer of "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength, and with all your mind: (Deuteronomy 6:4-6) and your neighbour as yourself." An A+ answer and both he and Jesus know it. Then comes the kicker, Jesus says, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." *Do* this. Not learn this, although learning is very important, not think this, although how we think is very important, but *do* this and we shall live.

Then he tells the story of the man who is in the ditch, beaten up and left to die. He says that a priest, the highest of the religious leaders who surely would know about loving God, passed by on the other side so as not to get involved. The Levite, who would be the lay leader of Temple or synagogue passed on by the other side as well. Who helped? The Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews hated one another. Samaritans historically were a mixed race people. Jews who had intermarried with Assyrians during the occupation 750 years previously. They were a people who believed that the centre of worship of God was on Mount Gerizim not Jerusalem and were, in fact, opposed to the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, that very same Temple where Jesus is headed during this little exchange in the gospel of Luke. That a hated Samaritan would *do* the love of God while those who surely had learned the law and had the right thoughts would be accused of not doing it, was shocking to the lawyer and to all of those gathered round Jesus. It is tempting to be judgmental of those awful lawyers, priests and lay leaders.

Last year I read a book that I got from the business section of Chapters. I always like to keep my hand in what people are reading in that realm. It is not a new book. It is called "The Tipping Point" by Maxwell Gladwell (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002). In talking about the power of context in our lives Gladwell cites a study that took place in Princeton. Let me read a part of it to you.

Some years ago two Princeton University psychologist, John Darley and Daniel Batson, decided to conduct a study inspired by the biblical story of the Good Samaritan...Darley and Batson decided to replicate that study at the Princeton Theological Seminary...(They) met with a group of seminarians, individually, and asked each one to prepare a short, extemporaneous talk on a given biblical theme, then walk over to a nearby building to present it. Along the way to the presentation, each student ran into a man slumped in an alley, head down, eyes closed, coughing and groaning. The question was, who would stop and help? Darley and Batson introduced three variables into the

experiment, to make its results more meaningful. First, before the experiment even started, they gave the students a questionnaire about why they had chosen to study theology. Did they see religion as a means for personal and spiritual fulfilment? Or were they looking for a practical tool for finding meaning in everyday life? Then they varied the subject of the theme the students were asked to talk about. Some were asked to speak on the relevance of the professional clergy to the religious vocation. Others were given the parable of the Good Samaritan. Finally, the instructions given by the experimenters to each student varied as well. In some of the cases, as he sent the students on their way, the experimenter would look at his watch and say, “Oh, you’re late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago. We’d better get moving.” In other cases, he would say, “It will be a few minutes before they’re ready for you, but you might as well head over now.” (p. 163-164)

Let’s see if you can predict which seminarians played the actual Good Samaritan? Do you think the ones who were reminded of the importance of compassion by having just read and thought about the passage from the Good Samaritan or the ones who were asked to think and talk about the relevance of professional clergy to the religious vocation? Remember, all were asked to think and integrate their understandings of their call to ministry by filling out the questionnaire. Turn to your partner and see what you think. Then we will ask for a raising of hands.

If you raised your hand to vote for the seminarians that had just read the parable of the Good Samaritan, your answer is highly consistent with what most people’s response when asked that same question. The Tipping Point goes on to say:

Neither of those factors made a difference. “It is hard to think of a context in which norms concerning helping those in distress are more salient than for a person thinking about the Good Samaritan, and yet it did not significantly increase helping behaviour,” Darley and Batson concluded. “Indeed, on several occasions, a seminary student going to give his talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as he hurried on his way.” The only thing that really mattered was whether the student was in a rush. Of the group that was, 10 percent stopped to help. Of the group who knew they had a few minutes to spare, 63 percent stopped.

What this study is suggesting, in other words, is that the convictions of your heart and the actual contents of your thoughts are less important, in the end in guiding your actions than the immediate context of your behaviour. The words, “Oh, you’re late” had the effect of making someone who was ordinarily compassionate into someone who was indifferent to suffering – of turning someone, in that particular moment, into a different person.” (p. 165-166)

So, I am here to tell you today that you are fundamentally decent and compassionate people. Going and doing likewise in our lives seems to depend on the context in which we choose to live our lives. Rev. Dr. Martin Rumscheidt once said in a doctrinal class at the Atlantic School of Theology (some time during the 90's) that it has been a great Christian sin and a foundational piece of anti-Semitism to imagine that the New Testament did away with the Old

Testament or the laws of the Jewish faith. Jesus understood himself to be a teacher of those very laws. These laws could be summed up as “Love your God with all your heart and mind and soul (thinking, feeling, believing) and love your neighbour as yourself (the doing)”

One of the very exciting things happening all over mainstream religion is the recovery of the cornerstones of religious practice which find their genesis in Judeo-Christian faith. One of these practices is the reclaiming of Sabbath time. The Hebrew scriptures are quiet clear about the need for humanity and indeed all of Creation to rest and re create. It is critical that we build time into our day to rest, to contemplate, to sit with God in silence and to pray, in whatever ways work for you. If you think about the Princeton study, its implications are that in our faster moving society when people are rushing around to get their paid work tasks done at all hours of the day including emailing until late in the evening, running their family members to where they need to be and frantically struggling to see their volunteer commitments through, no wonder we are becoming a less kind society. We have no time to be kind and merciful and open minded.

Have you noticed the growing prevalence of the breakfast meeting? Since morning, afternoons and evenings are so full of stuff and things to do, businesses and volunteer organizations, including churches are holding breakfast meetings. I refuse to go. I am at my most stunned, that time of day anyway. Martha bought me a button that I love. It says, “‘Not a morning person’ does not even begin to cover it.” However, it is also my time of contemplation and prayer. I am able to live my intense, stressful day because I take that Sabbath morning time. North Americans consider contemplative time, resting time to be non-productive time. Nothing could be further from the truth. Building such time into our day creates better people, more faithful people, more engaged civic minded citizens. It makes perfect sense that in societies where the pace of life is slower, hospitality to the stranger is elevated as a more important virtue than in societies where life runs at a break neck speed.

In a globalized economy we need to ask questions about how exporting values which include an impoverishment of Sabbath time affects others. If the stuff we are so busy collecting requires the virtual enslavement of others in twelve hour working regimens perhaps we are not the priest or lay leader passing on the other side of the road, perhaps we enter into the story more as the robbers who beat the man up. People too busy to rest become anxious, angry and/or apathetic. Fearful, demoralized people buy a lot of stuff if they can in an effort to feel better and feel even more demoralized, fearful and disempowered if and when they can't. Fearful demoralized people don't ask many questions. Fearful, demoralized people are easier to govern. Reinstating Sabbath time in our own lives is the first step in reassessing and reinforcing our own values, our own sense of inherent self worth and would go a long way in creating a culture of leaving time for kindness and for mercy. Perhaps we would find we did not, after all need all that stuff or all of those appointments. We might begin asking some hard questions of ourselves and our institutions. We might have more time to notice the guy or guys lying in the ditches of life. Jesus said about the merciful Samaritan that we should “Go and do likewise.” We need to regularly rest from our usual doings in order to gain the presence of mind to do the merciful doings we ought to do on a regular basis. It kind of begs the question - if the priest or lay leader had a good nights sleep, a nice leisurely breakfast, given their partner a really good hug good bye and then contemplated the wonder of God as they walked down that road, would the story have turned out differently?

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